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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7071  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2134

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001225

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM/ANE, EAP/MLS  
GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/19/2019

TAGS: PREF PHUM PREL SMIG TH LA

SUBJECT: LAO HMONG IN PETCHABUN: NGO PULLS OUT, ARMY  
PREPARES TO EMPTY CAMP BEFORE SEPTEMBER 30.

REF: A. BANGKOK 1223 (AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH FM)  
B. BANGKOK 1103 (NGO TO LEAVE LAO HMONG CAMP)

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, for reasons  
1.5 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: NGO Doctors with Borders (MSF), the only outside organization in the military-run camp for Lao Hmong in Petchabun, announced its decision to cease humanitarian assistance citing army interference in its work. There is clear evidence that Thai authorities are preparing to return all 4,800 remaining Lao Hmong in Petchabun to Laos in the coming weeks/months - likely forcibly if necessary. The returns will include even those "screened in" in the opaque Royal Thai government (RTG) vetting process completed in January 2008.

¶2. (C) Comment: We continue our efforts to urge the Royal Thai government (RTG) to conduct a transparent screening of the Petchabun population, most recently in the Ambassador's May 20 meeting with Foreign Minister Kasit Piroyma (Ref A). We will raise Hmong issues with DPM Suthep Thaugsuban in the Ambassador's meeting with him on June 1. (Suthep oversees security issues and thus has influence over the military and Ministry of Interior.) We also continue efforts to identify an appropriate MSF replacement so that PRM funding (via UNICEF) of key activities such as health, water and sanitation can continue with minimal interruption. We have forwarded draft press guidance to Washington. End Summary and Comment.

¶3. (U) On May 20, the Paris-based NGO Doctors Without Borders (French acronym: MSF) called a press conference in Bangkok to announce its decision to cease all humanitarian assistance activities in the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF)- run camp for Lao Hmong in Petchabun. MSF had been providing medical care, food distribution, and water/sanitation. MSF Thailand country director Gilles Isard denounced "the policy of forced repatriation of the Hmong population of the camp back to Laos, and MSF refuses to work under military pressure." According to Isard, RTARF pressure on MSF began in early 2009, after the NGO resisted army efforts to enlist MSF workers in the increasingly coercive methods to return Hmong to Laos. Subsequent army interference in food distribution, and in the operations of its medical clinic, were cited by Isard. MSF rejected RTG suggestions that the pull-out was sudden and without warning, noting a series of public statements of concern made over the RTG's repatriation process over the last year. Isard said the NGO is willing to retain a few staff members in the camp for two weeks to enable the transition to a possible successor organization.

¶4. (SBU) UNICEF, through which PRM has been funding most of MSF's activities in the camp, visited Petchabun on May 18-19 to survey the immediate humanitarian needs. It was only the second visit permitted UNICEF by the RTG in over a year,

although UNICEF is funded by PRM to provide some recreation services for the camp's numerous children. A large Ministry of Foreign Affairs contingent accompanied UNICEF. Food is the most pressing issue: stock-piles for the general population are sufficient only until May 29 (special nutritional supplements for the camp's many pregnant women will last several weeks longer). In order to ensure delivery before May 29, food orders will have to be placed in the next several days. Given residents' mistrust of the RTARF, UNICEF believes an outside NGO should retain responsibility for food purchase and distribution. The local public health system is willing to take over services in the medical clinic - if donor funds can be found. Although there are no medical stockpiles, MSF has given medications to patients with chronic conditions sufficient for the next 3-6 months. Two international NGOs now providing assistance in the Burmese refugee camps are being considered by UNICEF and post to replace MSF: the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR) and the French NGO Solidarites. The RTARF prefers a local Thai NGO, which would presumably be less likely to offer public criticism of the military's handling of the Petchabun Hmong.

¶15. (C) The UNICEF visit to Petchabun turned up further evidence that the RTARF intends to return - forcibly if necessary - the remaining 4,800 Lao Hmong over the summer. Local army commanders openly stated that the budget for transportation of the group is currently on the Prime Minister's desk for approval. A large board along the camp's fence-line counts the days down until the camp will be closed on September 30. Barbed wire fencing was put up around the military compound last week, suggesting military fears of a

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possible backlash from uncooperative Hmong. Local army commanders told UNICEF that five percent of the camp might fear return to Laos. (Comment: we were told by the RTG in January 2008 that about 15 percent had been "screened in" by the internal vetting process then just completed.) For the first time, the RTARF stated that this residual group would be deported to Laos rather than referred to third countries for possible resettlement. According to UNICEF, RTARF officials said "safe return" would be negotiated by the RTG with the Government of Laos before the deportation of the "screened in" group took place.

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